

## **BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO THE GOVERNOR’S COMMITTEE ON PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

Note: This document contains background information and policy recommendations related to the issue area of “Communications” only. To access the Committee’s full report which covers ten issue areas, please visit the Committee’s website [here](#).

### **COMMUNICATIONS**

#### **GOAL**

Increase communication access and improve public awareness about people with disabilities.

#### **Overview**

Communication brings people together. Enabling easier and more efficient communications has benefits in the workplace, civic discourse and participation, and social settings. However, disabilities can present challenges to effective communications by, among, and with people with disabilities, either by impairing or altering methods for communication. Ensuring that these differences in communication styles do not hinder, but rather enrich, two-way communication is key to creating an accessible society for all of its members. Increasingly, information and communication technologies (ICT) are playing a vital role in mediating communication and it is critical that these advances enhance access by including consideration of disability, rather than serve as a new barrier to people with disabilities.

#### ***Background and Purpose: Accessible and Assistive Technologies***

Technology opens the doors of opportunity. With the right services, gadgets, and equipment, people with disabilities can open the doors of opportunity to self-sufficiency, work and play. Ensuring that mainstream technology is accessible and usable by people with disabilities is essential to realizing the full promise of information and communication technologies. To that end, the federal government has passed several laws over the past two decades to ensure that virtual barriers are not erected; the Americans with Disabilities Act; [Section 255](#) of the Communications Act; [Section 508](#) of the Rehabilitation Act; and most recently, the [Twenty-First Communications and Video Accessibility Act \(CVAA\)](#) of 2010. And in 2005, the State of Texas took strong steps to promote the accessibility of technologies used at work and home by passing [House Bill 2819](#), which requires each State agency to develop, procure, maintain and use information and communication technologies that are accessible.

Realizing the promise of these goals needs more work. In the 2012 Texas Governor’s Committee Citizens’ Input survey with 1,131 citizen respondents, the Texas Governor’s Committee on People with Disabilities found that nearly 70 percent of respondents “strongly agreed” that the availability of accessible communications needs to be increased and 77 percent “strongly agreed” that more financial support is required to assist people with disabilities in acquiring assistive technologies. Additionally, 73 percent of respondents “strongly agreed” that improved accessible technology is needed to increase participation by people with disabilities in State government and in their communities. When asked to further explain these views in their own words, 17 percent of respondents cited the lack of availability or

burdensome cost of assistive technologies that are designed to meet the needs of people with disabilities (e.g., screen readers, video phones, augmentative and alternative communication [AAC] devices, etc.). Another 10 percent cited mainstream technologies, such as the iPad, that have demonstrated their ability to help people with disabilities, but whose cost is too high.

Many of these new technologies do not work by themselves; they are enabled by high-speed Internet services, either wired directly to the home or workplaces or by wireless broadband. [The National Broadband Plan](#) seeks to promote connectivity across the whole community. In addition, from the 2012 Texas Governor's Committee Citizens' Survey, 65 percent of respondents "strongly agreed" that high-speed Internet services need to be expanded and 7 percent comments in the Communications area suggested that broadband be more widely available and that prices made affordable for people with disabilities, especially in rural areas.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

- **Recommendation 2.1:** Encourage the use of accessible technology to reach traditionally underserved populations, including people with disabilities, especially through the use of social media.
- **Recommendation 2.2:** Foster the development of accessible mainstream technology and promote its adoption by people with disabilities, especially for employment, as well as civic and community engagement.
- **Recommendation 2.3:** Promote the awareness of and access to assistive technologies, including mainstream technologies that have a demonstrated track record of meeting the needs of people with disabilities.
- **Recommendation 2.4:** Support programs that increase the availability and affordability of accessible information and communication technologies, including high-speed Internet service, for all Texans.

### ***Background and Purpose: Adopting Best Practices for Accessible Information and Communication Technology***

In 2011, the Department of Labor's [Office of Disability Employment Policy \(ODEP\)](#) and the [Assistive Technology Industry Association \(ATIA\)](#) concluded a comprehensive study of how to improve the design and development of accessible workplace technologies. The results highlighted several challenges in the implementation of accessibility for information and communications technology (ICT), including:

- lack of organizational commitment
- lack of access to consistent, reliable information
- lack of education/training

- lack of testing tools

To address these issues, efforts to improve policy, planning, education/training, and testing were identified. As a result of [HB 2819](#), Texas is already a leader in policy, but gaps remain in the other areas. The 2012 Governor's Committee Citizens' Input Survey conducted by the Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities found that nearly 70 percent of respondents "strongly agreed" that accessible communication in the workplace, programs, and services should be increased, that State and local websites needed to be more accessible, and that it was of high importance that State websites and public places (e.g., court rooms, government buildings and large venues) have accessible technologies and communications.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

- **Recommendation 2.5:** Provide publicly available educational resources for companies and developers to support the business case for, and the accessible development of, information and communication technology, including examples of market demand, business cases, business and technical requirements, sample code, training and testing tools.
- **Recommendation 2.6:** Encourage information sharing within the technological development community about emerging assistive technologies and best practices.
- **Recommendation 2.7:** Promote the development of standards of professional competence for accessibility practitioners in the area of information and communications technology.
- **Recommendation 2.8:** Support the inclusion of accessibility and Universal Design topics in the higher education curricula for computer science, engineering, design, and architecture.
- **Recommendation 2.9:** Encourage state agencies and state institutions of higher education to enhance opportunities for participation by people with disabilities in government, the workforce, and the community through the use of technologies enabled by ubiquitous access to broadband, "cloud computing," and related technologies.

### ***Background and Purpose: Hearing Technologies***

The number of Americans with hearing problems is rising, particularly due to the aging population, yet according to researchers, 1.4 million children in the United States have hearing problems <sup>1</sup> and 26.7 million Americans over the age of 50 have hearing loss, but only 14.2 percent wear hearing aids.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) states that few individuals are aware of current hearing aid technology and that only 69 percent of hearing aids are equipped with telecoils that can be used with telephones and hearing loop systems in public venues.<sup>3</sup>

Hearing loops are thin wires that encircle a room and connect to a sound system. They transmit the audio, using magnetic induction, directly to a telecoil in a hearing aid, cochlear implant, or other assisted listening device. This arrangement provides much clearer audio to the user, rather than amplifying the ambient noise in the environment. However, to work, the hearing aid needs to have a telecoil and public venues need hearing loops installed. While common in some European countries, the adoption of hearing loops has only recently started to increase in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

The lack of awareness and availability of such technologies is significant to Texas. According to the 2012 Governor's Committee Citizens' Input Survey, 73 percent of respondents "strongly agree" that the affordability of hearing aid technologies needs to be increased and an additional 16 percent of free-response comments stated that Texans needed more information, education, and ability to afford hearing aids. Other states have begun to address these issues. For example, in Arizona, the law requires that hearing aid dispensers inform users about the availability, use and benefits of telecoil technology and about the assistive technology equipment program in the state.<sup>5</sup>

### **Policy Recommendations:**

- **Recommendation 2.10:** Promote the installation of hearing loops in places of public accommodations that have public address systems, spoken broadcasts or other audio programs.
- **Recommendation 2.11:** Support public programs and encourage private programs that assist Texans in the acquisition and the proper use of assistive hearing technologies, especially those with embedded telecoils.

### ***Background and Purpose: Awareness and Inclusion***

In the 2012 Governor's Committee Citizens' Input survey conducted by the Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities respondents were asked if there were any additional issues related to communications that need attention. Fourteen percent of survey participants raised concerns about the perception of, information about, and communications with people with disabilities. An additional 7 percent of survey participants specifically mentioned the need for more education and understanding of American Sign Language and interpreting services.

Public awareness of people with disabilities and their unique circumstances is a key part of communications. [The Barbara Jordan Media Awards](#), hosted by the Governor's Committee, has been an effective means of promoting accurate and positive stories about people with disabilities and the use of People-First language. These same themes were embodied by two laws passed by the 82<sup>nd</sup> Legislature in 2011. [House Bill 3616](#) established October as Persons with Disabilities History and Awareness Month in Texas and [House Bill 1481](#) requires People-First, respectful language in reference to individuals with disabilities in State laws and resolutions. As part of the latter bill, the "legislature finds that language

used in reference to persons with disabilities shapes and reflects society's attitudes toward persons with disabilities.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Policy Recommendations:**

- **Recommendation 2.12:** Promote awareness and knowledge of American Sign Language (ASL) as a secondary language.
- **Recommendation 2.13:** Encourage the inclusion of People-First language in the curricula of mass communication and journalism programs in Texas institutions of higher education.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Kochkin, Ph.D., S. (2012) *Prevalence of Hearing Loss*. Retrieved from the Hearing Loss Institute website: [http://betterhearing.org/hearing\\_loss/prevalence\\_of\\_hearing\\_loss/index.cfm](http://betterhearing.org/hearing_loss/prevalence_of_hearing_loss/index.cfm)

<sup>2</sup> Chien, M.D., W. & Lin, Ph.D., F. (2012, February 13). *Prevalence of Hearing Aid Use Among Older Adults in the United States*. Retrieved from the Archives of Internal Medicine website: <http://archinte.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1108706>

<sup>3</sup> American Academy of Audiology. (June 2011). “*Get in the Hearing Loop*” Campaign Promotes Doubling Functionality of Hearing Aids. Retrieved from the Hearing Loss Association of America website: <http://hearingloss.org/content/get-hearing-loop>

<sup>4</sup> Weiss, S. (2012, April 9). *How hearing loops can help*. Retrieved from the Washington Post website: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/how-hearing-loops-can-help/2012/04/09/gIQAvhEb6S\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/how-hearing-loops-can-help/2012/04/09/gIQAvhEb6S_story.html)

<sup>5</sup> Arizona State Legislature (50<sup>th</sup> Legislature Second Regular Session 2012) *Bill of sale; requirements; Bill No. 36-1909*. Retrieved from the Arizona State Legislature website: <http://www.azleg.gov/FormatDocument.asp?inDoc=/ars/36/01909.htm&Title=36&DocType=AR>

<sup>6</sup> An Act related to the Use of Person First Respectful Language in Reference to Individuals with Disabilities, House Bill 1481, 82<sup>nd</sup> Texas Legislative Session (2011)